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FOLK-LORE OF THE BONES.¹

WHEN, a new-fledged medical student, I first applied to my preceptor for directions in my reading, he laconically replied, "Study the bones." I have been following this advice more or less ever since, and it is the result of a part of these studies, not exactly anatomical, to which I invite your attention to-day.

The subject may not sound to you a promising one. "As dry as a bone" is a familiar proverb which I have some misgivings you may apply to this paper concerning the folk-lore of the bones; but I hope that the importance of the subject will make amends for its rather forbidding character.

I claim that it *is* an important branch of folk-lore, and moreover that it has been a singularly neglected one. There is enough material about it within my reach to fill a good-sized volume without padding; and yet I have not found a single article in folk-lore publications relating to the subject.

Nothing is more familiar than some of its modern instances. Who of us has not taken his or her share in breaking the "pull-bone" or "wish-bone" of the domestic fowl at the dinner-table? And how many young ladies must plead guilty to hanging it above the door that it may point out the first bachelor who enters as a suitor to their hands? Its efficacy in both these directions, as a grantor of wishes and an indicator of nuptials, is, I think, derived from its shape, which, like the horseshoe, simulates that of the new moon, and carries us back to the worship of Astarte and Ostara, goddesses of fertility and reproduction.

From the earliest times certain bones were used as amulets, and probably the most ancient fetish in existence is the thigh-bone of a mammoth carried to their cavern by the later cave dwellers of Belgium, and now preserved in the Museum of Natural History in Brussels. The small bones of the carpus and tarsus were perforated and worn on the person as a charm, some specimens of which may be seen in Mr. Maxwell Sommerville's collections in the University of Pennsylvania. To this day in the south of England, such efficacy is attributed to a small bone obtained from a pig's skull.² This magical power of bones is a survival from early conditions, and is to-day paralleled in the methods of the rain-makers of Southern Polynesia who employ human bones to compel the clouds;³ and by

¹ Read at the Annual Meeting of the American Folk-Lore Society, November 29, 1889.

² *Notes and Queries*, 3d series, vol. ix. p. 146.

³ Frederick E. Sawyer, *Folk-Lore Journal*, vol. i. p. 215.

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the sorcerers of the Zulus who by the same potent agencies discover lost objects and advise prosperous ventures.¹

Very close to these savage notions is the belief which I have often heard in Pennsylvania that the severity or mildness of the winter can be predicted by inspecting the breast-bone of a goose killed in November. If the surface has dark stains, the winter will be bitter; if the bone is white and clean, an open season may be anticipated.

When our boys on election nights gather around the bonfires of tar barrels, they are perpetuating a very ancient rite connected with the sacredness of bones; as is illustrated in the word itself, for after much discussion there is scarcely room left for a doubt that "bon-fire" was originally "bone-fire," and referred to a fire in which bones were burned as symbolic of a sacrifice. Not only is the earliest occurrence of the word in English literature "bone-fire" given with its translation into Latin *ignis ossium*; but the rendering of the word into Irish by an old poet, one of the O'Sullivans, *cnaimh theinne*, has precisely the same meaning.² To this day, in the remoter parishes of Munster and Connaught great fires are lighted on St. John's Eve (June 23), in each of which a bone is burnt,³ a survival of the sacrifices which once celebrated the midsummer night and the summer solstice.

The bone in the bonfire was something more than a symbol. Its presence grew out of and illustrates the deepest and most remarkable phase of osteologic folk-lore. It represented the animal or man burned in the ancient sacrifice, because the notion is nigh universal in primitive mythology and modern superstition that the immaterial part of creatures, their indestructible element or soul, is connected with or resident in the bones. Such a belief has a ready foundation in the durability of the osseous skeleton, and its permanence when the soft parts have disappeared. It was believed that the personality of the individual clung to his skeleton, and the terror which is still generally inspired by this object, no matter how beautifully cleaned and mounted, is a survival of this venerable belief. In some parts of Europe, as in the Netherlands, it is still a popular belief that if a person takes a human bone home with him from the graveyard, the dead man to whom it belonged will torment him until he returns it.⁴

Very generally among our people a human bone is considered an uncanny and ominous object, not to be kept in houses. The same

¹ Rev. Canon Callaway, *Religious System of the Amazulu*, p. 332 seq.

² See *Notes and Queries*, 3d series, vol. i. p. 109, and the *Century Dictionary*, *sub verbo*.

³ G. H. Kinahan, "Notes on Irish Folk-Lore," in *Folk-Lore Record*, vol. iv. p. 97.

⁴ Benjamin Thorpe, *Northern Mythology and Popular Superstitions*, p. 333.

feeling led the Chinese to taboo it, and in the ancient law of the Israelites a person who so much as touched a human bone was unclean for seven days.¹ An altar on which one was burned was polluted, and by such action Josiah, king of Judah, desecrated the sacrificial places constructed by Jeroboam, son of Nebat.²

Yet among the ancient Hebrews, as among so many other nations where incineration did not obtain, a very sacred character attached to the bones of the dead. One of the most terrible curses which Jeremiah proclaims as from the Lord against the idolatrous people of Judah is that their bones shall not be gathered or buried, but "shall be as dung upon the face of the earth;"³ and the chief of the transgressions of Moab for which the prophet Amos fulminates the malediction of Jehovah is, "that he burned the bones of the king of Edom into lime."⁴

The secret of this respect was distinctly the belief that the soul continued to dwell in the bones, and that their disturbance or destruction was construed to be a direct attack on the individual, and very much more than a mere insult to his memory or his relatives.

The fixed opinion that the man continued to live in his bones is abundantly shown in the Old Testament writings themselves as well as in the later Talmudic scriptures. Thus, Elisha, during his life, by stretching himself upon the dead son of the Shunammite woman, restored him to life; and the dry bones of Elisha, when touched by the corpse of the Moabite soldier, were still so replete with his miraculous individuality, that the corpse "revived and stood up on his feet."⁵

The writers of the Talmud not only recognized the bones as the casket of the soul, but had discovered which particular bone was its indestructible seat. They did not seek it anywhere near the pineal gland, as did with equal acumen the philosopher Descartes, but quite at the other end of the vertebral column, in the ossicle at its lowest extremity, that called the *os coccygis*, to which the learned Rabbis gave the name "the resurrection bone." This they believed could not be destroyed, and from it the individual should derive his second life. This is illustrated in an anecdote of the Rabbi Joshua ben Chanania which is thus related in the Talmud:—

"The Emperor Hadrian (may his bones be ground to powder, and his name stand accursed) once asked the Rabbi Joshua ben Chanania 'From what shall the human body be reconstructed when it rises again?' The Rabbi replied, 'From the little bone *Luz*, in the backbone.' 'Prove this to me,' demanded the Emperor. Then the Rabbi

¹ Numbers xix. 16.

³ Jeremiah viii. 1, 2.

⁵ 2 Kings xiii. 21.

² 1 Kings xix. 2; 2 Kings xxiii. 16.

⁴ Amos ii. 1.

took the bone Luz and steeped it in water, but it was not softened; he put it in the fire, but it was not consumed; he placed it in a mill, but it could not be ground; he laid it on an anvil, and smote it with a hammer, but the hammer broke, and the anvil was split in pieces."¹

From this anecdote it appears that it was the hardness and seeming indestructibility of the bone which gave it the honor of being the seat of the soul. There was difference of opinion among the learned rabbis whether, when in sending the flood the Lord said, "I will destroy man whom I have created," the bone *luz* was also destroyed. Most of the rabbis believed that it was, and therefore that there is no resurrection in store for the antediluvians.

While the Israelites thus selected one extremity of the vertebral column as the seat of the soul, very many other nations chose the opposite extremity, and looked upon the skull as the bone, or congeries of bones, which preserved the individuality.

In pursuance of this opinion a widow in the Andaman Islands will carry on her shoulder the skull of her deceased husband until she remarries, on which event it is incontinently consigned to the refuse heap. In various parts of Africa and America the skulls of ancestors were preserved and honored with a superstitious reverence. They were supposed still to contain some flash of their ancient wit, and at least to be of potency as talismans and charms. This power extended in earlier folk-lore, classical and Teutonic, to the skulls of lower animals. In Greece and Rome the skull of the ass was sacred to Priapus, and was placed in gardens and orchards that their field might be protected from thieves; while the Germans of the age of Tacitus were wont to erect in fields and on the paths leading into the enemy's country what were called "nith-posts" or "cursing poles," stakes supporting the skull of a horse, which were supposed to exert a maleficent influence on approaching plunderers. Thus in the Saga of Egil it is related that Egil planted a stake on a point of rock and placing upon it a *horse's skull* said, "Here I set up a nith-post (*nidstaung*) and I turn the curse of it (*nid*) toward King Erich and Queen Gunhilda." Thereupon he carved the curse in runes upon the post and turned the face of the skull toward King Erich's land. But the genial German ethnologist, Dr. Richard Andree, has given us so complete a study of the sacred character of skulls that I need not pursue this fertile branch of my theme.²

The mysterious potency which was held to reside in human bones led to their extended use in medicine. It is a fact that as late as the

¹ Hershon, *The Talmudic Miscellany*, p. 295.

² See his article on "Schädelcultus" for the above and many other references in his work *Ethnographische Parallelen und Vergleiche*, ss. 127-147 (Stuttgart, 1878).

last century pulverized portions of the human skull were administered in various diseases. The medical virtues attributed to the bones, indeed, would form quite a long chapter. Among other things, they were held to be intoxicants. Writing in England in 1686, Aubrey complained that "cunning Alewives do mix the Ashes of dead-men's bones in their ale to make it intoxicating;"¹ and so widespread was this superstition that about that date a statute was formally passed in Ireland forbidding the custom.²

Returning to the magical virtue supposed to reside in bones, we find it most prominently illustrated in the belief in the efficacy of the saints' bones, so widely prevalent in the early Christian Church, and which continues to-day in some of its branches. Undoubtedly this was founded on the old Jewish notions as shown in the history of Elisha's bones which I have already quoted. In the eighth century it was so generally adopted that at the Synod of Nicæa (787) it was commanded that no church should be consecrated which was not in possession of such a relic, under penalty of excommunication.³ The trade in the bones and other remains of the saints was one of the briskest in the Middle Ages, and the literature of the subject is very extensive. John Calvin wrote a treatise declaring that great profit might come to all Christendom if there was a careful register kept of all the saints' bones and other relics.⁴ But Martin Luther had no sympathy with such opinions, and with his usual bluntness declared that these relics were "dead things and sanctify nobody."⁵

In America, quite as much as in any part of the world, we find superstitions and myths centring around the bony skeleton. The opinion was very general among the native tribes that the soul or immortal part dwelt in the bones, and from these would somehow come to life again. The bones of the departed were therefore treasured with scrupulous care. In fact, the Jesuits in Paraguay and the English in Virginia accuse the Indians of worshipping the bones of their ancestors.⁶

From this reverence arose the custom of communal bone-burial, to which custom we must attribute the numerous so-called bone-mounds found in the Mississippi Valley and on the Atlantic slope. After the corpse had been buried in the earth for some months, it was disinterred and the bones cleanly scraped. They were then placed in a basket or other receptacle until a number had thus accu-

¹ J. Aubrey, *Remains of Gentilisme and Judaisme*, p. 165 (Folk-Lore Society's edition).

² *Ibid.* p. 239.

³ J. Benham, *Dictionary of Religion*, s. v. "Relics."

⁴ H. Malcolm, *Index of Theological Literature*, p. 398.

⁵ J. Benham, *ubi supra*.

⁶ Ruis, *Conquista Espiritual de Paraguay*, p. 48.

mulated, when they were carried with appropriate ceremonies to a selected spot, where the adjoining earth was heaped over them in the form of a mound. The incidents attending such a tribal burial are detailed at length by some of the early travellers.¹

In some nations the bones were not interred but cleaned and stored in ossuaries or charnel houses. When the tribe forsook the locality, these ancestral relics were carried with them. As late as the middle of the last century, when the Nanticokes of Maryland were ordered to remove to northern Pennsylvania, the pathetic spectacle was presented of the men and women trudging through the mud, heavily laden with the sacred skeletons of their forefathers.²

The oracle of the shamans or native priests of the Carib tribe was a human bone. They wrapped it carefully in cotton, and alleged that the soul of the deceased dwelt in it, and communicated to them their prophecies and spells. To injure an enemy, they would wrap up with this bone something belonging to him, believing that the magical power of the bone could thus be directed against their foes,³ — a close parallel to the horse's bone in the Egil Saga.

It would not be difficult to parallel in native American superstitions and myths pretty much all the folk-lore about bones which we may collect in the Old World. In the *Popol Vuh*, the sacred book of the Quiches of Guatemala, the dry bones of the four hundred brothers who become the stars of heaven are restored to life by the word of the hero-god, as were those in the valley by the command of the prophet Ezekiel. Grant that both are figurative narratives; yet both indicate the underlying and far-reaching sentiment that the most durable part of the body of man is the residence of his soul after death.

This is the solution of the wide-spread reverence for, or dread of, human bones; and it is interesting to discover the same principle at the basis of superstitious stories so extensively disseminated as these which relate to osteologic folk-lore.

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Note. Since this article was in type, my attention has been called to an interesting collection of superstitions regarding bones, which appeared in *L'Homme*, April 10, 1887, by M. Paul Sébillot, entitled *Les os de mort dans la légende et la superstition*. It contains many references, additional to those which I have brought together, illustrating the prominence of these objects in the folk-lore of widely-separated nations. — D. G. B.

¹ For these and other particulars of a like nature see references in my *Myths of the New World*, pp. 272-274 (second edition, New York, 1876).

² See references in my work *The Lenâpé and their Legends*, p. 23 (Philadelphia, 1885).

³ De Rochefort, *Histoire Naturelle et Morale des Iles Antilles*, p. 473.